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ABSTRACT

School psychologists can play a unique role in schools because of their assessment expertise. Traditionally, they have been most involved in individual psychoeducational assessment for classification and labeling purposes, but the limitations of this form of assessment for building intervention strategies has led many school psychologists to broaden their role. Currently, there are at least three major purposes of school psychological assessment: (1) informing entitlement/classification decisions; (2) planning interventions; and (3) evaluating outcomes. Techniques linking assessment to interventions are being demonstrated by school psychologists as they consult with teachers to enhance the classroom performance of students. Further, school reform initiatives have required more program evaluation at the building and system level and school psychologists are engaged in these activities as well. Assessment is an important task in the schools, and school psychologists can increase their impact on school effectiveness by contributing their expertise in this domain at many levels. (JBJ)

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by Sylvia Rosenfield and Deborah Nelson

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The School Psychologist's Role in School Assessment

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Overview

Psychological services for children originated within a diagnostic testing model. Psychometric techniques were developed to assess individual children's cognitive-intellectual, personality and academic functioning. Today, testing techniques have achieved a high degree of prominence and testing is a major industry.

Recently, however, assessment in the field of school psychology has been changing and reshaping itself to meet the demands of public policy and litigation, the requirements of an increasingly diverse student population, and the constant shifting of educational concerns. There have been, as well, continual refinements in the concepts and technology of measurement (Taylor, Tindal, Fuchs, & Bryant, 1993). These changes have challenged all school professionals to modify their assessment practices in order to adapt to them. However, within the schools, it remains true that there are few others with training, experience and expertise in assessment comparable to that of school psychologists.

Traditionally, school psychology has emphasized diagnosis and classification of individual students, and school psychologists have acted as gatekeepers for special services. But as the current ethical, political, legal and educational context has evolved, there has been a re-ex amination of the purposes and applications of data gathered during the assessment process (Taylor, et.al., 1993). In a position paper on the *Role of the School Psychologist in Assessment* (1994), the National Association of School Psychologists endorsed the proposition that assessment practices must be linked to prevention and intervention to provide positive outcomes for students. Thus, there is an increasing emphasis on information that is "useful in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating interventions" (Reschly, Kicklighter, & McKee, 1988, p. 9-50). Moreover, it is suggested that school psychologists assist both local education agencies and state education agencies in restructuring schools in positive ways. One of the constant elements in the school restructuring movement is the call for greater accountability at every level, which has resulted in "innovative thinking about alternative forms of assessment" (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992, p.3).

This broader, more outcome based approach to the use of assessment in schools has had an impact on the assessment practices of school psychologists. Currently, there are at least three major purposes of school psychological assessment: informing entitlement/classification decisions, planning interventions, and evaluating outcomes.

Assessment Purposes

Entitlement/Classification Decisions

Although, historically, the school psychologist has been the professional to develop an individual diagnosis of a referred student using psychoeducational tests, that role became even more routinized as a result of the 1975 federal legislation, P.L. 94-142, requiring testing for classification prior to delivering services to children with handicapping conditions. However, there have been recent changes in the field of special education, with pressure increasing for inclusive placements in regular education classrooms even for students with severe and profound disabilities. These pressures arose from research demonstrating limitations of the traditional classification, labeling, and placement procedures, many of which relied upon school psychologists' testing of students referred for problems. Challenges to the norm referenced tests used to justify the classification and placement decisions arose for many reasons, including "lack of data to support the use of certain types of tests..., litigation related to the discriminatory nature of other types..., and the general feeling that most tests did not provide educationally relevant information" (Taylor, et.al., 1993, p. 114).

Since federal law and related state regulations still, in most cases, require labeling for funding purposes, norm-referenced psychoeducational assessment will likely continue in the schools to fulfill the legal mandate. However, currently there is an emphasis upon improving the technical characteristics of the most commonly used tests to answer growing concerns about the soundness of many of these instruments. In addition, several basic constructs underlying these tests have been revised, and new constructs of cognition and neuropsychological and psychological processes, such as memory and metacognition, are finding their way into new test construction and revisions of older instruments (Taylor, et al, 1993). How useful these new and revised tests and their underlying constructs are remains open for further study, although there continue to be weak or nonexistent links to interventions for most psychoeducational tests (Macmann & Barnett, 1994). In addition, as requirements for eligibility for funding are modified, the use of tests for these purposes will also evolve

Assessment Linked to Intervention

Perhaps the most far-reaching change in the role for school psychologists has been an increased emphasis on

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linking assessment and intervention, so that information from the assessment process leads directly to intervention strategies rather than just to a diagnostic label and alternative placement for the student. School psychologists have moved from relying upon standardized/norm referenced testing practices to frequent use of more natural and dynamic forms of assessment that impact directly on classroom instructional delivery and behavior management. The importance of this shift arises from the current state of classroom assessment. While the instructional and management decisions that teachers make about their students have been recognized as critical to important outcomes, relatively little attention has been paid to the quality and process of classroom assessment in research or practice. This has been true in spite of evidence that teachers are concerned about the quality of their own assessments, and have limited knowledge of assessment methodologies and their use in instructional decision making (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). Increasingly, school psychologists have become involved in developing and delivering behavioral and curriculum-based assessment procedures useful for classroom decision making to assist teachers.

A recent development has been the growth of curriculum-based assessment methods that use direct observation and recording of student performance in the classroom curriculum itself to gather information for instructional decisions. Two major forms of this type of assessment are the curriculum-based assessment for instructional design (CBA-ID) model (e.g., Gickling & Rosenfield, in press), and the curriculum-based measurement (CBM) model (e.g., Deno, 1986). CBA-ID was designed to assist teachers in planning instruction for individual students, whereas CBM was developed primarily to assess pupil progress in the classroom. The information derived from these techniques are used by school psychologists consulting with teachers to support them in developing interventions related to instruction and classroom management (Rosenfield, 1987). These classroom based models of assessment are also used by prereferral and support teams designed to provide assistance to teachers and students.

Outcome Evaluation

School reform has created a focus on the outcomes of education. Psychologists are involved in discussions of a possible national test to be given to all students, and state assessments aligned with state content standards are in the process of development. Many of these will be performance assessments, which still have serious technical issues that need to be resolved (Ysseldyke, 1994). School psychologists have a role in helping school personnel understand and use the results of these external assessments.

At the local level, outcome assessment is also changing. Reform in regular and special education often involves the creation of new programs. School psychologists can bring their assessment expertise to the school reform agenda by helping school systems and individual schools evaluate the effectiveness of different programs and organizational changes designed to meet specific goals. School psychologists can provide assistance in systems change efforts, including needs assessment prior to program implementation, as well as on-going monitoring of program implementation and effectiveness along a broad array of outcome dimensions, depending upon the goals of the school personnel. Conducting research and evaluation to answer important questions about effective programs is an additional assessment role in which many school psychologists can participate.

Summary

School psychologists can play a unique role in schools because of their assessment expertise. Traditionally, they have been most involved in individual psychoeducational assessment for classification and labeling purposes, but the limitations of this form of assessment for building intervention strategies has led many school psychologists to broaden their role. Techniques linking assessment to interventions are being demonstrated by school psychologists as they consult with teachers to enhance the classroom performance of students. Further, school reform initiatives have required more program evaluation at the building and system level, and school psychologists are engaged in these activities as well. Assessment is an important task in the schools, and school psychologists can increase their impact on school effectiveness by contributing their expertise in this domain at many levels.

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